

# “SUSPENDING VILLAGE” A MODEL OF NEW DEVELOPMENT AREA IN THE NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS REGION OF CHINA

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**ABSTRACT:** The southern part of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in China was infamous for its poverty and serious soil erosion caused by over population. In order to alleviate poverty and backwardness, a plan was worked out: to remove 200,000 people to the north plain by developing newly irrigated land during the period of 1983-1992. The plan has been in operation for eight and half years to date. About 200,000 people have been removed from the poor southern part to the newly developed area, and 800,000 mu (1/15 ha) of desert land has been cultivated. Most of the migrants have been lifted out of poverty and the people's life in the south is being improved. During the immigration process, a model, called "Suspending Village", has been developed. In the article, the whole process of the development and the strategies are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** Suspending Village, regional development, population resettlement

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is located in the northwest China. The Hanghe (Yellow) River flows through the region from middle-east to north. It is a province in which the Chinese Muslim-Hui Nationality is concentrated, who form about one third of the total population, hence the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

From 1983 to 1990, about 200,000 people were successfully removed from the overpopulated hilly area to newly developed irrigated area by a model called "Suspending Village". It is a great achievement in the history of population redistribution and regional development.

Ningxia is naturally divided into two parts: the northern plain area and the southern hilly area. Their physical and economic environment are quite different.

The northern part, including four cities and eight counties, is an arid and semiarid plain area. The annual precipitation is less than 200 mm. The Huanghe River flows across the northern part, with an annual discharge of 32.5 billion m<sup>3</sup>, greatly contributing to the economic development in this area. Agriculture, industry and other human activities in the plain are dependent on water resources withdrawn from the Huanghe River. There would be no agriculture without irrigation although other conditions such as temperature, soil, landscape etc. are suitable for a variety of crops. The history of irrigation development in the area is long, and can even be traced back to 2,000 years ago. At present, it is a famous oasis in the northwest China. As long as establishing irrigation system, the fertile land here can be used. The southern part including eight counties is located in the transitional zone between the Loess Plateau and desert. The topography is mainly loess hills combined with small tablelands and basins. The annual precipitation is about 300 to 500 mm, a little more than that in the northern part, but surface water is scarce. The local people used to rely on unirrigated cultivation. They could maintain a simple life because of low population density. However, during the past four decades, population increased rapidly, but grain production increased slowly due to the limited natural conditions of the land. The per capita grain production, for example, decreased from 323 kg in the 1950s to 192 kg in the 1980s. As a consequence of overpopulation, water and soil erosion became more serious, natural disasters occurred more often. The living standard lowered and people lacked adequate food and drinking water, so the area became infamous for its poverty in China.

The government provided relief grain and fund for the poor people year by year. In the 1970s, about 60,000 tons of grain was imported into this area every year. The assistance from the government only helped to resolve small problems, and was not enough to help the poor people to eliminate poverty. The crux of the matter is that such poor land could not shoulder the large population

## II. "SUSPENDING VILLAGE": A PLAN OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POPULATION RESETTLEMENT

In order to eliminate poverty in the southern hilly area, a ten-year plan was made to remove 200,000 people from the poor areas to the northern part developing irrigation systems during the period of 1983–1992. The plan was made and implemented by the local government. The investment comes from the central government and the World Bank.

There are a lot of lessons to be learnt from the history of population migration in this area. During the 1950s and the 1960s, for example, 170,000 people were moved from outside to Ningxia to reclaim wasteland. According to investigation, only 6.8 per cent of the migrants settle down there now. The lessons pushed the planners to find some more suitable

ways and strategies to achieve the purposes of the plan. Then the model of "Suspending Village" was developed and adopted.

## **1. Historical Origin and New Definition**

"Suspending Village" was used to describe a traditional way of cultivation in the hilly area. Because of a low population density and the special natural conditions, each household had very scattered farming land. Some pieces of the land were far from their houses, so a simple dwelling built near them. The simple dwelling, which was called "Suspending Village", was used during the planting and harvesting seasons. Such extensive cultivation perhaps had some relationship to ancient nomadism in this area.

The concept of "Suspending Village" used today is different from its original meaning. It adopts an old name, but it is a new concept. The new "Suspending Village" is an embryonic form of village, or a real village, not a simple individual dwelling. They are newly residential areas in the newly developed irrigated areas for migrants mainly from the poor hilly area.

In the first two or three years, the new houses were used seasonally like an old "Suspending Village". The migrants came to plant trees and crops in spring, and returned to their old homes, they came again in harvest time. From spring to harvest season one of two members or a family came to irrigate and fertilize their fields a few times. That is why the old name was adopted. After the first three years, the migrants settled down in the new homeland. So the "Suspending Village" became a real village.

Today, the "Suspending Village" can be defined as: a newly established residential area in a newly developed irrigated area for the migrants from other places. In the article, "Suspending Village" is quoted to describe the model of regional development and population redistribution (Fig.1).

## **2. Process and Strategies**

### *2.1 Prerequisite*

Before implementing the plan for population resettlement, major water works diverting water from the Huanghe River must be undertaken to develop irrigated farmland. In 1983, a large channel, which had a discharge capacity of  $20 \text{ m}^3/\text{s}$ , was finished and began to supply water. This was an important factor for the success of the plan. More than half of the people resettled have benefited from this project. It is common for big water works to take more than ten years to build. Without the previous completion of water works, it would be difficult to carry out the plan.

### *2.2 Population resettlement*

Population migration is, in fact, the resettlement of families. Families to be resettled should be chosen according to some rules. The first is that preference is given to the poorest

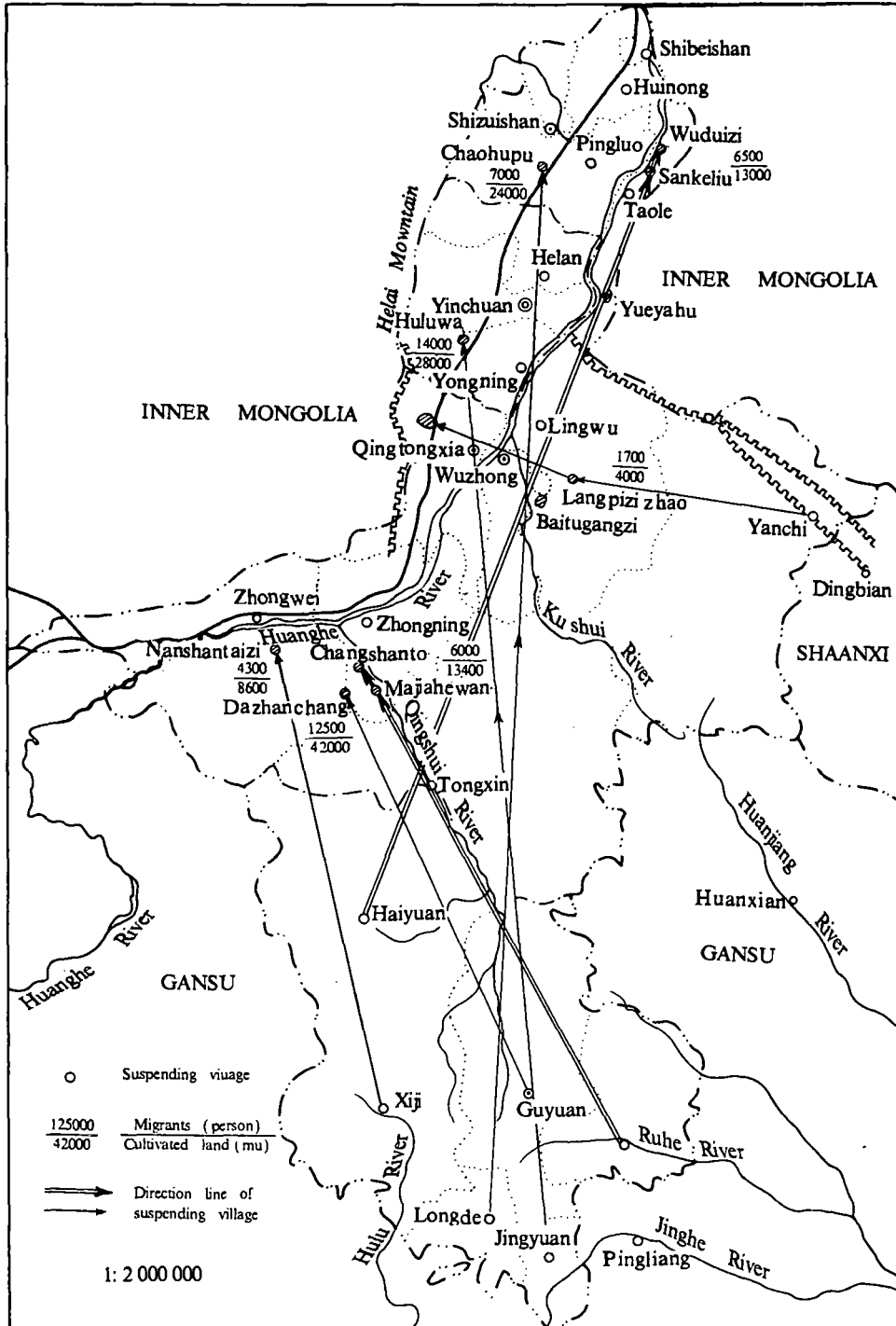


Fig.1 The of "Suspending Village" in Ningxia Sketch

families. The second is that the greater the number of labours in family, the more likely they are to be resettled.

At the beginning, however, people did not like moving to an unfamiliar place, although their life in the hilly area was difficult. This was partly because of a strong sense of homeland rooted in Chinese culture. Another reason was that the conditions of the newly developed area appeared worse than their old home area. It was a desert area covered with sand, stone and scarce vegetation. Sand storms even made it difficult to see at times. Also families lacked confidence in the future of their new homeland, and were afraid of losing their old ones. In order to convince the people, an important strategy was introduced.

Three years were given to the migrants to adapt the new environment then made a decision whether they wished to stay or not. Two *mu* of newly developed irrigated land was allotted to each migrant in the new development area. They were allowed to keep their old farmland in the hilly area for three more years. Their registered residence remained in their old home, though their new home was located in another county that could be hundreds of kilometers away. These policies were used to guarantee that they could return to their old homes if they did not like the new one. Families have a long time to compare the two homes then make a decision. If they felt unhappy about their choice, they had the chance to change their mind. After three years, generally the new fields became more fertile and productive, and the desert area appeared to become greener. When the families had to decide whether they stay or go back, few of them choose the latter. The three-year adjustment period gave them encouragement to find a better life. Otherwise, most of them, perhaps, would hesitate about resettling. Thus, this appears to be a successful strategy in the "Suspending Village" model.

Another effective strategy was collective resettlement. The migrants were resettled and organized according to their original spatial relationships. People from the same village were resettled together in "Suspending Village"; people from one commune constituted a newly established commune having the same name as their old one. Although the migrants were in a totally different natural environment and hundreds of kilometers from their old homes, the social environment changed very little. The families had a common background, the same customs and religion, and even the same neighbors. They did not need to change their social life very much when living in their new natural environment. This made it easy for them to accept the change.

The government plays an important role in the process of population resettlement. New houses were built for the migrants by the government without charge, or with little charge; or a fixed fund which made donations to migrants so that they could build houses themselves. Public facilities, such as hospitals, schools, banks and shopping centres, are all provided and built by the province and county government. The relief fund and food are supplied in the first three years. If the migrant misses the season to plant in the first year for acceptable reasons, their food will be supplied by the county government from their old

home area, If the grain production is too low to support their families, the government is responsible for supply the difference up to an average level.

Population resettlement is systematically organized. An administrative organization is in charge of the management of the whole process. Before their resettlement, people are informed about a variety of aspects of the resettlement. Long distance movement is conducted by private and public vehicles, petrol is paid by the government. When they arrive in the newly irrigated area, local government help them learn how to cultivate irrigated land which they were not familiar with. Technical booklets are given to guide them how to promote a diversified economy in their new homeland.

### **2.3 Regional development**

To develop potentially cultivatable land is a national policy. The north plain of Ningxia is seen as a suitable region to develop, and the efforts in building irrigated systems have continued. After the building of major water works, a lot of work is still required, including levelling the land, digging irrigation ditches, building up road systems, and so on. This is very intensive labour. Sometimes, the utilization of water facilities does not reach its designed capacity because of shortages of labour to manage the newly developed land.

The migrants from the south helped to solve this problem. They are located in areas where labours are in short supply. In the beginning, they took part in the construction of essential facilities, such as irrigation systems, roads, houses and other public buildings. They were paid in terms of food relief. Levelling the land was done separately by families. The family can receive 20 to 60 yuan (RMB) subsidy from the government for levelling each *mu* of land.

Every migrant, including adults and children, is allotted two *mu* of newly irrigated farmland, with some land to plant grasses and trees. That is to sure the resettlement of more people from the hilly area, and to utilize all the facilities more effectively.

Tree-planting is recognized as an important part in the development of arid land. Migrants are encouraged to plant trees around their houses and along roads. Shelter belts are planted to protect crops from strong winds and sand storms.

### **3. Achievement and Assessment**

Up to now, the plan has been implemented for eight and half years. By the end of 1990, about 20 "Suspending Villages" had been built. The total population resettled had reached 200,000, and about 800,000 *mu* of desert land had been cultivated. The investment was, on an average, 338 yuan (RMB) per migrant, and 143 yuan (RMB) per *mu* of newly developed irrigated land. Large sums were spent on major water diversion projects. Adding them together, the average investment becomes 915 yuan (RMB) per person and 435 yuan (RMB) per *mu*.

The investment benefits are comprehensive and visible. The "Suspending Villages"

are becoming new oases. Most of the migrants have been lifted out of poverty. The people living on relief for years are now able to support themselves. Some of them have even become prosperous. A questionnaire investigation, by the Ningxia Academy of Social Science, revealed that 83% of the migrants thought that their life had become better; and 86% felt that their productive conditions had improved. This is a good starting point for further economic development.

Not only the migrants but also those remaining in the hilly area benefit from “Suspending Villages” model. Removing one person from the hilly area benefits others in the old area. Because of the reduction of population, steep-sloped land in the old area is no longer cultivated. Bushes and grasses that help to protect soil and store water have been planted there instead of crops. The ecological environment of the hilly area is improving, along with the people’s life there.

The “Suspending Village” model has been recognized as a successful model in regional development and population resettlement. In the northwest China, it is becoming a model to follow. Its experience may be valuable for other regions and other countries.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The “Suspending Village” is a combination of regional development with population resettlement. Its success depends on a variety of factors, including subjective and objective ones. A principle of successful population resettlement is that the living conditions in the new residence area must be better than that in the old one. The poverty of the hilly area resulted in a very low starting point for comparison, which makes it comparatively inevitable that migrants will be more satisfied. The conditions in the newly developed area were potentially, but not actually, better at the beginning of the process. In this sense, the success of the model is mostly due to the suitable strategies employed, which represents the main characteristics of the “Suspending Village” model.

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